

PHONE CALL *by Berton Roueché*

I GOT OUT OF THE TRUCK and got down on my knees and twisted my neck and looked underneath. Everything looked O.K. There wasn't anything hanging down or anything. I got up and opened the hood and looked at the engine. I don't know too much about engines – only what I picked up working around Lindy's Service Station the summer before last. But the engine looked O.K., too. I slammed down the hood and lighted a cigarette. It really had me beat. A school bus from that convent over in Sag Harbor came piling around the bend, and all the girls leaned out the windows and yelled. I just waved. They didn't mean anything by it – just a bunch of kids going home. The bus went on up the road and into the woods and out of sight. I got back in the truck and started it up again. It sounded fine. I put it in gear and let out the clutch and gave it the gas, and nothing happened. The junker just sat there. So it was probably the transmission. I shut it off and got out. There was nothing to do but call the store. I still had three or four deliveries that had to be made and it was getting kind of late. I knew what Mr. Lester would say, but this was one time when he couldn't blame me. It wasn't my fault. It was him himself that told me to take this truck.

There was a house just up the road – a big white house at the edge of the woods, with a white Rambler station wagon standing in the drive. I dropped my cigarette in a pothole puddle and started up the road, and stopped. A dog was laying there in the grass beside the station wagon. It put up its head and – oh, Jeepers! it was one of those German police dogs. I turned around and headed the other way. There was another house back there around the bend. I remembered passing it. I went by the truck and walked down the road and around the bend, and the house was there. It was a brown shingle house with red shutters, and there was a sign in one of the windows: "Piano Lessons." The name on the mailbox was Timothy. I couldn't tell if there was anybody home or not. There wasn't any car around, but there was a garage at the end of the drive, and it could be parked in there. I went up the drive and around to the kitchen door, and when I got close I could hear a radio talking and laughing inside. I knocked on the door. The radio went off. Then the door opened a crack and a woman looked out. She had bright blond hair and little black eyes, and she was forty years old at least. "Yes?" she said.

"Mrs. Timothy?" I said. "I work for the market over in Bridgehampton, Mrs. Timothy, and my truck –"

"How do you know my name?" she said.

"What?" I said. "Why – it's on the mailbox. I just read it on the mailbox."

"Oh," she said. She licked her lips. "And you say you work for a market?"

"That's right," I said. "The market over in Bridgehampton. And my truck's broke down. So I wondered –"

"What market?" she said.

"Why, Lester's Market," I said. "You know – over in Bridgehampton?"

"I see," she said.

"That's right," I said. "And my truck's broke down. I wondered could I use your phone to call the store and tell them?"

"Well," she said. She looked at me for about a minute. Then she stepped back and opened the door. She had on a pink sweater and one of those big, wide skirts with big, wide pockets, and she was nothing but skin and bones. "The telephone's in the living room. I'll show you."

I followed her through the kitchen and across a hall into the living room. I guess that was where she gave her music lessons, too. There was a piano there against the wall and a music stand and a couple of folding chairs, and on top of the piano was a clarinet and one of those metronomes and a big pile of sheet music. The telephone was on a desk between the windows.

"I don't suppose you need the book?" Mrs. Timothy said.

"What?" I said.

"The telephone book," she said. "You know the number of your store, I hope?"

"Oh, sure," I said.

"Very well," she said. She reached up and straightened the "Piano Lessons" sign in the window. "Then go ahead and make your –" She turned around, and she had the funniest look on her face. I mean, it was real strange. It was like she was scared or something. "I thought you said you had a truck?" she said. "I don't see any truck out there."

"My truck " I said. "Oh, it's up around the bend. That's where it broke down. You can't see it from here."

"I see," she said, and looked at me. She still had that funny look on her face. Even her voice sounded funny. "I'm here alone, but I want you to know something," she said. "I don't live alone. I'm married. I've got a husband, and he'll be home any minute. He gets off work early today." She came away from the window. "So my advice to you is to make your call just as quickly as you can."

"O.K.," I said, but I didn't get it. I watched her go across the room and through the hall to the kitchen. I didn't get it at all. She acted almost like I'd done something. I heard a car on the road and looked out. I thought maybe it might be her husband, but it was only some guys in a beat-up '59 Impala. But so what if it was her husband? I mean, Jeepers – she really had me going. I turned back to the desk and picked up the phone. Another woman's voice on the party line was saying, "But, of course, I never let on. I simply –"

I put down the phone and lighted a cigarette, and wandered down the room. I stopped at the piano and looked at the pile of sheet music. They were none of them songs I ever heard of. I looked around for an ashtray, and I found a big white clamshell. It looked like they used it for that. It was on a little table next to an easy chair. Then I went back and tried the phone again. The woman was still talking. I listened for a

moment, but it sounded like she was still going strong. I was beginning to get kind of worried. I looked at my watch. It was already almost four o'clock. I went over to the clamshell and punched out my cigarette, but I guess I was in too big of a hurry. I punched too hard or something, and the clamshell flipped off the table. I made a grab, but I only touched it, and it skidded across the rug. I squatted down and picked it up, and, thank Gosh, it wasn't broken. I must have broke its fall. It wasn't even cracked.

I heard Mrs. Timothy coming. The cigarette butt had rolled under the chair, and I brushed the ashes after it. Mrs. Timothy came through the door, and stopped. Her mouth fell open.

"It's O.K.," I said. "It didn't even –"

"What were you doing in that table drawer?" she said.

"What?" I said.

"I said what were you doing in that table drawer?" she said.

I shook my head. "Nothing," I said. "What drawer? I mean, I wasn't doing anything in any drawer. I just accidentally dropped this ashtray. I dropped it and I was just picking it up."

Mrs. Timothy didn't say anything. She just stood there and looked at me. Then she cleared her throat. "Well," she said. "Did you make your call?"

"Not yet," I said. "The line was busy."

"Oh?" she said. "And how do you know that? I didn't hear you dial or even say a word."

"I don't mean the store," I said. "I mean the party line. It was your line was busy."

She gave me one of those looks. Something sure was eating her. She walked over to the desk and picked up the phone and listened. Then she held it out. I could hear the buzz of the empty line. She put down the phone. "I suppose they just this minute hung up," she said. "Is that what I'm supposed to believe?"

"There was somebody talking before," I said. "I tried it twice."

"I don't know what you have in mind, but I advise you to forget it," she said. "I'm not that easily fooled. I'm really not as stupid as you seem to think. I know what's going on these days. I read the papers, you know. I hear the news, and I've heard about boys like you. I know all about them. I didn't want to let you in. I only did it against my better judgment. I had a feeling about you the minute I opened the door." She stood back against the desk. "I don't believe you had a breakdown. I don't believe it for a minute. If you broke down where you say you did, you were practically in front of the Millers', so that's where you would have gone to phone. You wouldn't have come all the way down here. I don't think you even have a truck. I think you came through the woods." She took a deep breath. "And now I want you to leave. I want you to get out of my house."

"I don't know what you're talking about, Mrs. Timothy," I said. "I just want to call the

store. I've got to call the store."

"I said get out of my house," she said.

"O.K.," I said. "O.K., but –"

"I said get out," she said. She reached in one of the pockets of her big skirt and brought out a knife. It was a kitchen knife, with a long blade honed down thin. She pointed it at me like a gun.

"Hey!" I said.

"Oh, I see," she said. "That changes things. It's a different story now, isn't it? You didn't know I could take care of myself, did you? That never occurred to you." She came away from the desk. "You thought I was just another helpless woman, didn't you?"

I stepped back a couple of steps. "Hey," I said. "For Gosh sake, what do you –"

"What's the matter?" she said. "You're not afraid of me, are you?" She moved the knife. "A big, strong, tough boy like you?"

I stepped back again.

"Hey," I said. "For Gosh sake, what do you –"

"You are a big, strong, tough boy," she said. "Aren't you?"

"For Gosh sake, Mrs. Timothy," I said. "I don't know what you're talking about. I wasn't doing anything."

She kind of smiled. "A great, big, strong, tough boy," she said.

I didn't say anything. The way she was looking at me, I couldn't hardly think; I couldn't hardly even believe it. It was like it was all a dream. I took another step, and stumbled into one of the folding chairs. Then I was up against the piano. I looked at that knife coming at me and my heart began to jump. She meant it. She really meant it, but that didn't mean I had to just stand there and let her. I slid along the front of the piano and reached up and touched the metronome and pushed it away and stretched and found the clarinet and grabbed it.

She let out a kind of yell. "Don't you dare!" she said.

"You put that down!" She raised the knife. "Put that clarinet down."

But I had a good grip on it now. I looked at that knife with the point coming at me, and swung. I swung at it as hard as I could. I felt it connect, it tingled all the way up my arm. The knife went sailing across the room and I heard it hit the wall. Mrs. Timothy didn't move. She just stood there, and she was holding her wrist. It wasn't bleeding or anything, but it looked kind of funny and loose. Then she began to scream.

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VOCABULARY

convent

metronome

party line

honed

1. What does the Delivery Guy's attitude about the truck and the girls on the bus tell us about his character?
2. Why does the Delivery Guy go around to the back door?
3. What signs are there that Mrs. Timothy is a suspicious person?
4. Make a chart to compare what really happened with what Mrs. Timothy assumed was happening.
5.
 - a) What could Mrs. Timothy have done differently to make things work out better?
 - b) What could the Delivery Guy have done differently to make things turn out better?
6. Explain in your own words how Mrs. Timothy came to be injured.
7. Imagine that you are either Mrs. Timothy or the Delivery Guy, and that you have been taken down to the police station to explain what happened. Write a brief report from your character's point of view detailing the events and attitudes that led to the injury (*What did you do, what was your attitude ... what did the other character do, what was their attitude?*).